

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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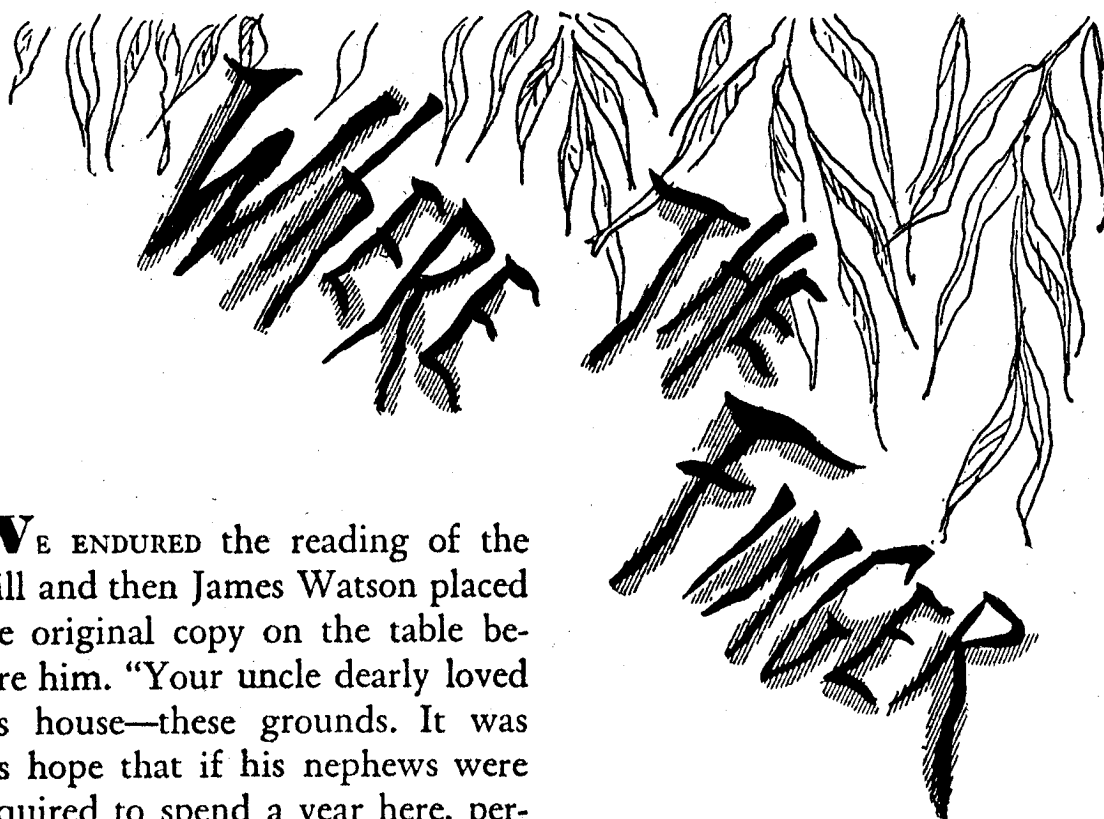
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WE ENDURED the reading of the will and then James Watson placed the original copy on the table before him. "Your uncle dearly loved his house—these grounds. It was his hope that if his nephews were required to spend a year here, perhaps one of them might decide to reside here permanently and maintain the place in its present condition."

Orville Crawford frowned. "The three of us in this house for one year? Impossible."

Freddie agreed. "We detest each other. Uncle Benthany was quite aware of that. We'll probably kill each other before the year is out."

"Nevertheless," Watson said.

"The will stipulates that all of you live in this house for one year. If any one of you fails to meet the residence requirements, at the end of the year his share of the estate shall be equally distributed among the survivors . . ." He quickly corrected himself. ". . . among those who remain."

There was one other interesting codicil and Watson chose to repeat

Voodoo, ouangas, pointing bones, and all the rest of that paraphernalia are generally discredited by our civilization . . . yet few among us would like to have an ouanga point her finger at us, with the prediction that we will die before sundown.





By Jack Ritchie

PRINTS

it. "And, of course, if none of you fullfill the one year residence . . . for one reason or another . . . the entire estate will go to Amantha Desfountaines."

Naturally, at this point, we again glared at Amantha.

She was dark-haired, taller than average, and her face remained composed as we stared. She had been my uncle's housekeeper for the period of four months preceding his death. It was difficult to estimate her age, but I thought

that the early thirties might be a fair guess. And I thought I detected the sparkle of a smile in her pitchblack eyes.

I turned to Watson. "I understand that at my uncle's death an autopsy was performed."

The admission was reluctant. "Yes."

"In a parish as isolated and relatively backward as this, is it customary to perform autopsies in routine deaths?"

His eyes flicked momentarily to Amantha and then back again. "No. However your uncle left instructions that there should be an autopsy when he died."

"And the result of that autopsy?"

"A *natural* death," Watson said firmly. "*Absolutely* natural. The coroner—an excellent *medical* man—is positive."

I glanced at Amantha. Yes, a hidden smile.

Freddie, Orville, and I are tenuously related and find a common unity only back to Uncle Benthany. We are not brothers, nor even first cousins, and only Orville actually bears the Crawford name.

His lank hair is thinning and he is the president of a New Orleans firm which specializes in collecting bad debts. He finds sharp-toothed enjoyment in his work and during his apprentice days he was bitten by dogs a number of times.

Freddie Meridith wears sports jackets and bow ties and he is an instructor in art at a small college for girls. Few people know that both of his wives were accidentally electrocuted in their bathtubs.

I have recently reached the age of forty, though new acquaintances assume that I am older. My manner, perhaps. I have a small inheritance from my father and this eliminates the necessity for labor and allows leisure for the development of intelligence. I admit to a certain egotism, but it is only the result of objective comparison. When I look beyond the moon, I am most dissatisfied.

Orville polished his shell-rimmed glasses. "I don't see how I can get away from the firm for a year."

Freddie paralleled with his objection. "How could I possibly get a year's leave? I'd probably be dismissed first. Besides, one of my students seems most receptive to. . . ." He sighed.

But these were routine gestures of protest and I did not bother to complete the trilogy. For a third share of three million dollars, one can put aside business, one's latest potential wife, or even one's freedom.

I spoke to Amantha. "Edgerton and I will take the second floor suite in the east wing."

When she left to make the ar-

rangements, Freddie turned indignantly to Watson. "Why would Uncle Benthany put *her* in his will? After all, she's been here only four months. You don't suppose that he and she were. . . ?"

"I don't know," Watson said.

And I did not think so. Uncle Benthany, from what I knew of him, was quite capable of any conduct. But I had the feeling that Amantha would not be a party to such an arrangement.

"Just who *is* Amantha Desfountaines?" Orville demanded.

Watson put his papers back into the manila envelope. He wound the string. He stared at his handiwork. Finally he cleared his throat. "She is a paroled murderess."

Watson went on to explain. "It seems that Mrs. Desfountaines—she chooses to retain the name of the husband she murdered—was married at the age of seventeen. Mr. Desfountaines was considerably older than she . . . in his fifties, I believe. He died three months after the marriage. His relatives insisted upon an autopsy and it was discovered that he had been poisoned. Under questioning, Mrs. Desfountaines admitted administering the lethal dose." Watson picked up his hat. "She spent fourteen years in prison and was paroled eight months ago."

Orville was incredulous. "Uncle

Benthany *hired* her? Didn't he know what she was?"

"Well . . . yes. As a matter of fact, I have the feeling that he . . . ah . . . searched for someone like her. So to speak."

I congratulated Uncle Benthany and his active little mind. Wherever he was—and if he were acclimated—he was undoubtedly chuckling.

Uncle Benthany detested us, for perhaps no more reason than that he was rich enough and malevolent enough to detest everybody. He could, had he been so inclined, have left his money to charities—if he were aware that they existed. But such wills are made to be broken, and so it appeared to me that Uncle Benthany had bowed to the inevitable—but chosen to season it.

Freddie was pale. "Do you mean to say that we've got to . . . to *eat* here? With *that* woman *cooking* for us?"

Watson spoke soothingly. "Mrs. Desfountaines does not do the actual cooking. There are servants for that. She merely superintends and directs the running of the household. However, if there should be any . . . untoward . . . circumstances, I shall, of course, insist upon an autopsy."

"I shall fire her immediately," Orville announced firmly.

Watson smiled. "But you can't. The will stipulates that she must

remain here as housekeeper for a full year or all of you will be disinherited."

When he left, I went upstairs to my suite. Amantha was directing two maids in the last minute tidying of my rooms.

I spoke to her. "I would like to mention that I prefer to have breakfast in my rooms. Edgerton will be down each morning to fetch it."

"I can have it sent up."

"Thank you, but only Edgerton knows how to prepare coffee to my taste and he will be down anyway."

We studied each other quite openly.

She smiled faintly. "Is Edgerton your food taster?"

For my own reference, it was difficult to describe her. Handsome was too little. Beautiful too much. She seemed a creature of the mind as well as the body. A rather rare combination.

"Except for the preparation of the coffee," I said, "I shall leave breakfast to your discretion—with the following reservations. If there is bacon or ham, I prefer tomato juice. Otherwise orange juice will do nicely. Under no circumstances will I endure fish for the first meal of the day."

At dinner that evening, I was about to elevate the first spoonful of chicken gumbo to my lips, when Orville stopped me.

"Just one moment, Charles," he said.

"Yes?" I noticed that neither Orville nor Freddie appeared to have any intention of eating.

Orville waved a hand over the table. "How can we tell that all this is . . . *safe*?"

I regarded a portion of okra in my spoon. "I hardly think that Amantha would poison us the first evening."

Orville was not as optimistic. "I don't know. I have the strong suspicion that most murderesses are a bit irrational. Freddie and I have been talking this over and we've come up with something. A safety measure."

At that moment Amantha entered the room and surveyed the table arrangements. "I trust that everything is satisfactory?"

Orville smiled. "We were just about to send for you. We have something important to discuss."

"Yes?"

Orville selected his words. "Mrs. Desfountaines, don't you think that one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the hand is worth prison in the bush?"

"What Orville means," Freddie said, "Is why don't each one of us—Orville, Charles, and me—just give you fifty thousand dollars at the end of the year?"

Orville rubbed his hands. "After

all, you've been a loyal and faithful housekeeper to Uncle Benthany for . . . ah . . . four *whole* months and we feel that you should receive some small token of our gratitude."

Amantha smiled faintly.

Orville went on. "Let us face the facts, Mrs. Desfountaines. If all . . . or only *one* of us . . . survives the year, you will receive nothing from Uncle Benthany's estate. Not one penny. We don't believe that is fair.

Amantha's eyes were laughing.

Orville nodded earnestly. "The one hundred and fifty thousand dollars is yours. In the clear. No strings attached."

"With all that money waiting for you," Freddie said happily, "you won't be tempted to . . . risk the electric chair? . . . by doing something rash."

Amantha smiled. "Mr. Crawford, you will give me fifty thousand dollars?"

"You may count on it," Orville said.

She turned to Freddie. "And you?"

"Certainly. I don't want to be poisoned either."

And then she looked at me.

"No," I said. "And now if there are no objections, I shall eat."

Freddie frowned. "Very well, Charles. *You* may take your chances. But don't expect sympathy from me or Orville when you lie

gasping and writhing on the rug."

Amantha was about to leave.

"One moment," Orville said. He indicated the table. "You don't want to . . . ah . . . take anything back to the kitchen, do you? I mean, perhaps there is something in the . . . the *salad*? . . . that might disagree with us?"

"Everything is quite safe, sir."

A grain of inspiration rattled in Freddie's head. "Why don't you just eat *with* us, Mrs. Desfountaines? Every meal. Eat *everything* we do. We're not snobbish, are we, Charles?"

Amantha's lips twitched. "Do you have any objections, Mr. Wicker?"

"None," I said. "Please join us."

And thereafter Amantha dined with us.

During the next week, Orville, Freddie and I had our possessions transferred to the house. We settled in our respective suites and prepared to pass the year, each in his own fashion.

On a rainy evening a month later, Freddie roused himself from horizontal meditation on the couch. "Did you know that this region is just *rampant* with Voodoo?"

Orville snorted. "An educated man does not believe in such nonsense." Then he bristled under my mild stare. "I have a B.A. in Ac-

counting," he said for my benefit.

Freddie maneuvered to a sitting position. "If an *ouanga* points a finger at you, you will die by sunset." He pointed in the general direction of Orville.

Orville stirred uneasily. "It just occurred to me that perhaps Amantha is not the only one I . . . we . . . have to worry about."

Freddie contemplated his forefinger. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that one of us possibly won't be satisfied with his share of the estate."

Freddie did not look up. "I am perfectly happy with one million dollars."

Orville regarded him pointedly. "Murder can get to be a habit."

Freddie smiled. "They were both accidents. The poor dears loved to listen to music while they bathed and their radios fell into the tub." He sighed. "They *lied* to me. Left me nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Late the next afternoon, Orville entered the living room pale and breathing heavily. He went to the liquor cabinet and trembled scotch into a glass. After a bracing swallow, he turned to Freddie and me. "She *pointed* a finger at me."

I glanced over the top of my magazine. "Who? Amantha?"

"No. An old, old woman. I was taking a walk around the grounds when I saw her under the willows

near the pond. She didn't say a word. Just glared at me and *pointed*. I think she was one of those wretched *ouangas*."

Freddie eyed the mantel clock. "It's about an hour before sunset. Do you have any last words?"

"Did you speak to her?" I asked.

Orville shook his head. "Good heavens, no! I just ran . . . *walked* away."

"It's quite painless," Freddie said. "An easy way to go." He snapped his fingers.

"Orville," I said. "As anyone cognizant of Voodoo and the like would know, what can be done, can be undone. She probably pointed at you for a solid reason. Ten dollars, I imagine. Why not offer her twenty to remove the curse and perhaps another twenty to tell you who gave her the idea?"

Orville grasped at that. "Do you think it would work?"

"Certainly. How do you suppose Voodoo practitioners earn the major portion of their incomes?"

Orville put down his glass. "Anyone *that* old can't walk very fast. I'll find her."

A half an hour after sunset, Orville returned. His shoes and trouser legs were muddy and his face was a mixture of green and white. "I couldn't find her anywhere." His eyes darted about wildly. "I'm doomed."

"Orville," I said patiently. "At this moment you are alive, are you not?"

He agreed.

"And it *is* after sunset, is it not?"

Orville blinked and put two and two together. "By George, that's right. It *is* after sunset and I'm still alive." He wiped the perspiration from his face and glasses and regarded us smugly. "I *told* you that an educated man is impervious to Voodoo."

I retired to my room that evening at ten and took with me a library volume of Tennyson. I hadn't read him since the days when I was sixteen and inclined to dream.

At ten after eleven, something brought me back from the world of white castles and maidens fair.

It was not quite a scream. It was something hoarse and urgent and it seemed to come from outside my open window.

I put the book aside. A gibbous moon behind a feathering of clouds provided sufficient illumination to whiten the lawn to the edge of the woods, but I saw nothing.

I looked directly beneath my second floor window. A rectangle of light from the window below lay on the shadows of the building. Orville's room.

I stared at the lawn and to the woods again. Had it been some animal?

Finally I shrugged and dismissed the matter. But I remained at the window. It was a beautiful evening and orange-blossom-scented breezes whispered in the night.

My attention was drawn again to the square of light below me. A silhouette, but not that of Orville. And then her arms raised and she pulled the curtains.

I went back to my chair and threw Tennyson into the wastebasket. I fetched a bottle from a cupboard. Samuel Johnson had said never to drink unless one were happy. Sam Johnson was an idiot.

The clock ticked away and I sat with my second glass and my imagination, when I heard the faint, muffled report. A gunshot? Had it come from below me, or this floor?

I frowned. In this wing, I was the only occupant of the second floor, except for Edgerton. Under me, Orville had his rooms. And to the rear . . . Amantha.

I went to Edgerton's door and listened. He was obviously asleep and in good nasal health.

Downstairs I rapped lightly at Orville's door and waited half a minute. I rapped again and then turned the knob.

Orville lay on the rug before his bed, his face turned toward the door. A pistol lay a few inches from his right hand.

I bent down on one knee beside

him. He was quite dead. He had been shot through the heart, but there was remarkably little blood.

I rose and telephoned the police.

A Sergeant Pouchet arrived with the uniformed police and eventually various medical officials and technicians joined him. We were questioned until the early hours of morning before we were given some respite.

Pouchet returned at noon, obviously in need of sleep, but determined to go over our statements again.

"Mr. Wicker," he said. "According to your statement, you heard the shot and then went downstairs?"

I nodded.

"Did you notice anything else . . . or hear anything at all before the shot was fired?"

"No," I said. "Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing."

He turned to Amantha. "And you claim that you *didn't* hear the shot? Your room is on the same

floor as Mr. Crawford's, isn't it?"

She was pale. "I was asleep. I heard nothing."

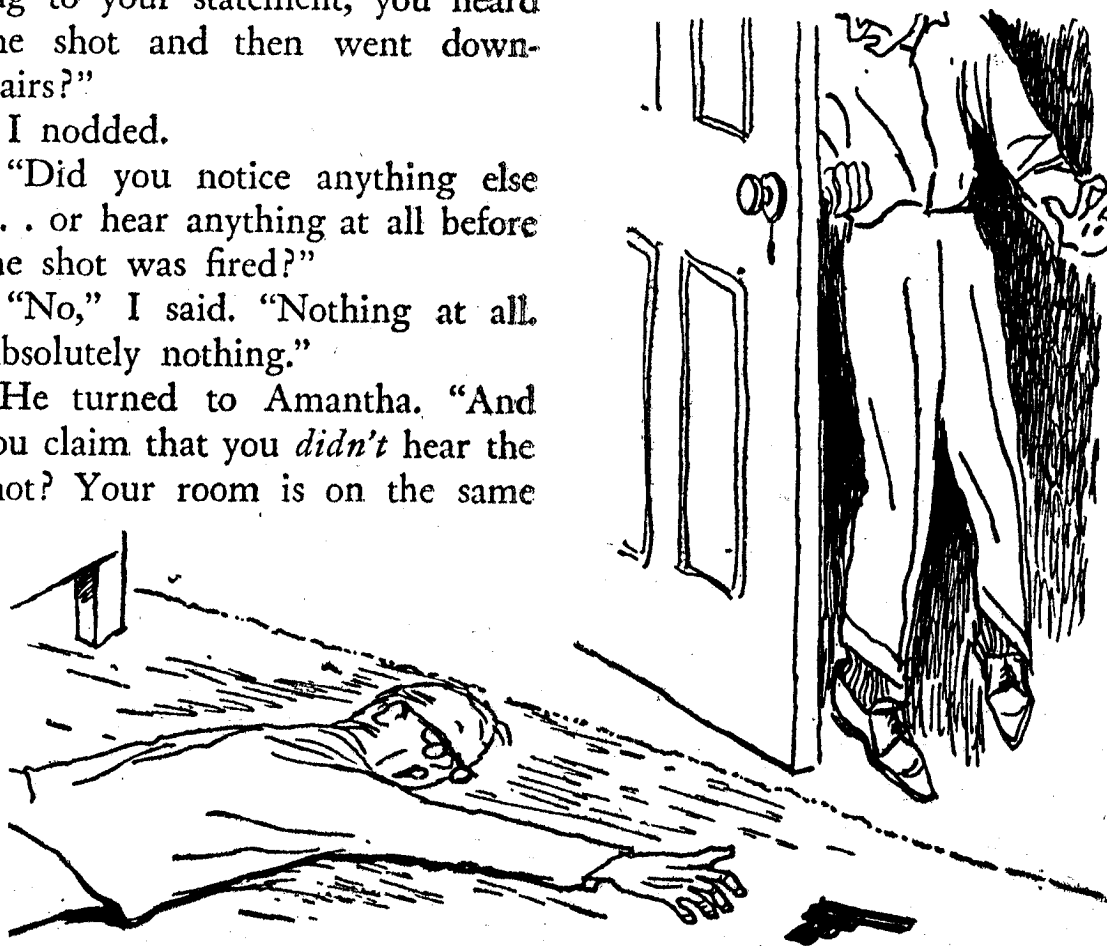
"My window was open," I said. "And I was awake."

Freddie interrupted. "Is there going to be an autopsy?"

"We've removed the bullet," Pouchet said. "It matches the gun found at his side." His eyes went over us. "From appearances, one would assume that he committed suicide."

Freddie sniffed. "Is that what you think?"

Pouchet smiled faintly. "Now



why would a man who's about to inherit a million dollars commit suicide?"

I offered a motive. "Perhaps Orville was in ill health?"

Pouchet shook his head. "We've been in touch with his doctor. Orville Crawford was in excellent physical condition. He had a complete physical examination a month ago."

"He might have been depressed," I said. "Or frightened. After all, an *ouanga* pointed at him last night. When a man fears death, he often tries to meet that fear by killing himself."

"We traced the *ouanga*," Pouchet said. "Auntie Beljame. She's the only one around here who still turns a hand to Voodoo. Auntie's on Social Security, but she needs tobacco money now and then."

"Who paid her?" I asked.

"She doesn't know. She got an unsigned typewritten note and twenty dollars in the mail. The note described the man she was supposed to point out and gave his name." He regarded me thoughtfully. "But Auntie Beljame can't see very well any more. And she waited out there for two hours. The damp seeped into her bones and her temper got short. Finally she just waited until *anybody* came out of the house and pointed at him. Then she went home."

Pouchet smiled again. "She pointed at the wrong man. She was supposed to point at you, Mr. Wicker."

That evening I received the first rubber doll—the one with the pin thrust through its head.

At breakfast in my rooms the next morning, I sat down and sighed.

"What is it, sir?" Edgerton asked.

"My foot," I said. "I have the most peculiar pain just at the ankle joint of my right foot."

"May I suggest linament?" He lingered after pouring the cream. "Sir, if you were to receive this million dollars . . . this million and a half now . . . would you change your style of living?"

"Not to any important degree."

"Then you don't actually *need* the money, do you, sir?"

"I suppose not. But nevertheless one gets a certain feeling of warmth to know that one has it."

After I finished breakfast, Edgerton returned for the tray.

"Edgerton," I said. "The coffee was bitter."

He paled. "You *drank* it, sir?"

"Of course I drank it."

"But, sir, suppose it was *poisoned*?"

"Nonsense," I said, but I was a trifle uneasy. "You *did* make the coffee this morning, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir." He thought about the

coffee for a moment and then his face cleared. "Now I remember, I'm afraid that I let it percolate much too long. The cook and I became involved in a discussion."

"What possible discussion could make you neglect my coffee?"

"We were talking about Voodoo, sir. The cook believes in it quite implicitly."

"That is undoubtedly the reason why she is a cook and not an empress."

Edgerton went to the hall door with the tray and I opened it for him.

An oblong package swung pendulum-like from the outside door-knob.

Edgerton frowned. "What is it, sir?"

I removed the package and broke the string around the cardboard box. In another moment I was gazing at a rubber doll with a pin thrust through its right foot.

Edgerton's eyes went from the doll to my foot.

"Just a twinge of pain now and then," I said sharply. "Nothing more." I regarded the doll belligerently. "This is all nonsense."

"Sir, it is *not* nonsense. Do you really believe that Mr. Crawford committed suicide?"

I said nothing.

"Forgive me for saying so," Edgerton said. "But you are an idiot."

"Edgerton!"

He was embarrassed, but determined. "Is it not idiocy to risk your life in this house . . . with a murderer, or murderess . . . merely to inherit a million and a half dollars which you don't really need?"

"Edgerton, there are times when I am unashamedly stubborn. I would rather be removed from here in a wicker basket than suc-



cumb to threats."

In the early afternoon I took a walk about the grounds. Near the junction of the driveway and the gravel country road, I left the path to study a group of ferns.

My attention was drawn back to the driveway when Freddie appeared and made his way to the roadside Crawford mailbox. He inserted an envelope into the metal container and raised the red flag.

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Then he glanced about—rather furtively, I thought—but he did not see me.

He walked back up the winding driveway and disappeared.

Two minutes later my reverie on the primordial nature of ferns was again interrupted—this time when Edgerton slunk out of the woods and made his way to the mailbox.

He quickly removed Freddie's envelope and began working a pen-knife under the flap.

I stepped from my concealment. "Edgerton, what *are* you doing?"

He dropped the envelope and seemed about to bolt, but then he recognized me. "Oh, it's *you*, sir."

I retrieved the envelope from the ground. "Explain yourself, Edgerton."

He licked his lips. "Well . . . sir . . . I thought that if Mr. Meridith was the individual who has been sending you those dolls, perhaps I could actually catch him . . . in the act, so to speak . . . of communicating with his Voodoo practitioner. Or even ordering another supply of rubber dolls."

I glanced at the envelope. It was addressed to Sergeant Pouchet. "Do you suspect that Sergeant Pouchet is Freddie's curse maker?"

Edgerton was, of course, uneasy. "I've often heard it said that beneath the thin veneer of civilization

there lurks the dark monster of the jungle—or something to that effect. I do not see why policemen are considered exempt."

The envelope flap was open and I pulled out the single folded sheet of paper. The note was typewritten and unsigned.

Removing the bullet is not enough. Why don't you do a complete autopsy?

Edgerton had been reading over my shoulder. "What does Mr. Meridith mean by that?"

I put the sheet of paper and the envelope into my pocket.

Edgerton was a bit shocked. "Aren't you going to mail it, sir?" "No."

Sergeant Pouchet questioned us again that day and the next. It was obvious that he suspected that Orville had been murdered, but proving that interesting point was another matter.

It was on another pre-evening walk that I came upon Amantha. I fell into step with her as we walked back to the house and after a few desultory words I found myself saying, "I've been told that you spent some time in prison?"

It was a blunt question—but typical of me, I'm afraid—and for a moment I thought that she would not honor it with an answer.

She stared at the dripping willows we passed and then spoke.

"Yes. I confessed to murdering my husband."

"Why?"

She looked at me coldly. "For his money, of course."

I smiled. "I didn't mean that. I meant why did you *confess*? It strikes me that you are quite capable of intelligent murder. You would surely not be caught, but even if you were, you certainly would not volunteer a confession."

She turned up the collar of her coat. "It's getting quite chilly."

I was not swerved. "To satisfy my unwarranted curiosity, *did* you poison your husband?"

"I told you quite plainly that I confessed."

"My dear Amantha, you are aware that I made a definite distinction. You *confessed* to the murder. Now I am merely asking if there was any validity to the confession?"

She did not speak again until we reached the rear door of the house. "If I were to tell you that I did *not* poison my husband, would that enable you to drink your orange juice with greater ease of mind?"

"It is more important than that."

Her eyes suddenly glittered. "I have spent fourteen shining years in prison. Do you not think that now life owes me a murder? Or two? Or three?" And then she smiled and her teeth were white in

the darkness. "And I am intelligent enough to make a success of the project, am I not?"

The next morning as I rose from the breakfast table, I winced.

"Sir?" Edgerton inquired solicitously.

"I have the strangest pain in my patella."

"Sir?"

"Patella," I said. "A sort of burning sensation."

He gathered the dishes and put them on the tray. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"No. It's probably nothing." I lit a cigar. "I believe I'll take a stroll in the garden."

I went downstairs, but instead of going outside, I turned into the library. It was empty and I found a chair in a relatively dark corner and waited.

Five minutes passed and then Edgerton entered the room and went directly to the dictionary stand. Hesitantly he began paging through the large volume.

"Patella," I said, and then spelled it. "P-a-t-e-l-l-a."

Edgerton froze.

I rose and walked toward him. "Patella. The kneecap. And while we are at it, I might also mention that it does *not* pain me one bit nor has it ever."

I'm afraid I showed my teeth. "Edgerton, it suddenly struck me

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that actually I had been receiving those blasted dolls after the fact—if we may use that expression. When I complained about a headache . . . *voilà!* . . . ten minutes later there was a doll on my door-knob, its head impaled by a pin.”

He could not meet my eyes.

“Upon mulling over this and after the receipt of the second doll, I preferred to think that perhaps there was a hidden microphone about my rooms. Whenever I vocalized some physical ailment, someone monitoring my words scuttled from his listening post and immediately stabbed and delivered a doll. But now I see that it was *you*, Edgerton.”

He hung his head. “Yes, sir.”

“And you were also responsible for the *ouanga*?”

“I’m afraid so, sir.”

“Edgerton,” I demanded. “What have you to say for yourself?”

He finally met my eyes. “Sir, I feared for your life. You are aware that we have one murderess and a possible murderer on the premises?”

“Go on.”

He waved a hand helplessly. “Sir, you admit that you do not *need* the inheritance, and yet you foolishly insist upon staying here. I do not believe that you can survive the year without someone murdering you.” He sighed. “I realized that it

was impossible to frighten you away to safety either by persuasion or reason. Therefore I resorted to the supernatural in the hopes of accomplishing that end.”

“In the realm of the supernatural, I am fearless.”

“I realize that now, sir, but it was my only hope.”

Edgerton looked quite contrite, and so I finally modified my glare. “Very well, your motive was commendable, but henceforth cease and desist.”

“But you *are* in danger, sir.”

“I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

His face brightened with a sudden thought. “Sir, it just came to me that perhaps *you* might be the murderer.”

“Edgerton!”

But he was attracted by the idea. “If you *are*, sir, you may certainly let me share your secret. I will keep the strictest confidence and it will set my mind at ease. Obviously if you are the murderer, it seems unlikely that you will murder yourself. I need worry no longer. Did you shoot Mr. Crawford, sir?”

“Edgerton, that will be all.”

In the evening I found Amantha alone in the living room. I sat down near her to read, but almost immediately put my book aside. “Amantha,” I said quietly, “I know that you were in Orville’s room

a little while before he was shot."

She studied me with those dark eyes. "Why didn't you tell that to Sergeant Pouchet?"

"I didn't think that it was . . . necessary."

She seemed slightly puzzled as she watched me.

"Amantha," I said. "*Did* you shoot Orville?"

After a moment she spoke. "Yes."

I stared and experienced a frustrating anger. "You didn't have to tell me."

"But you asked."

"I *know*, but still. . . ."

"Does that put you in an awkward position? Will you have to tell Sergeant Pouchet?"

"Damn Sergeant Pouchet." I found it necessary to pace the room.

"Amantha, it is entirely unnecessary for you to go about exterminating people. Especially for money. Eventually you can have all my . . . I mean, if you really want. . . ." I found myself unable to go on.

She smiled faintly. "But you won't even give me a paltry fifty thousand dollars just to insure that I do not poison you."

I waved a hand. "Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute. I mean that . . . if *you* really wanted to poison me, you are perfectly free. . . ." My collar felt tight. "I would rather be poisoned by you

than by anybody I know. . . ." I happened to glance at a mirror. My face was beet red. A schoolboy, I thought savagely. "Anyway," I went on lamely. "You didn't have to kill Orville."

"But I didn't. I merely shot him."

I waited to have that explained.

"I'd just finished locking up the house for the night," Amantha said, "and was going to my room, when I found Orville Crawford lying in the hall—half in and half out of his room, as though he had been trying to summon help when he collapsed and died. I was about to call for aid, but then. . . ." She hesitated.

"Yes?"

Amantha closed her eyes for a second or two. "Inside the room a glass lay on the floor. There was a decanter of whiskey on the table and when I smelled it. . . ."

She appealed to me. "Don't you understand? He had been *poisoned* . . . and there was a *poisoner* . . . a *murderess* . . . in the house. I would have been the one most obviously suspected and. . . ." Pain crept into her eyes. "Fourteen years in prison. I just couldn't face anything like that again. I pulled Mr. Crawford back into his room. Then I drew the drapes and removed the decanter and glass from the room."

She took a deep breath before she went on. "I went to the gun rack

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in the billiard room and returned to Mr. Crawford's room with a revolver. I put it into his hand ... and held it to his heart ... and pressed the trigger."

I nodded slowly. "Yes. It would seem as though he had died of a gunshot wound. There would be no need for a complete autopsy. The bullet would be removed and that would be that."

She looked up. "Are you going to tell Sergeant Pouchet?"

"I see no need to tell him anything at all." I sat down beside her. "There is something else I would like to know. If you did not poison your husband, why did you take the blame?"

She looked away and when she spoke her voice was tired. "My father was about to lose everything. He was immersed in debt. It was he who engineered the marriage ... the arrangement. He hoped that my husband would lend him the money he needed."

"But your husband refused?"

"My husband laughed at him. He said that he'd known all along why I'd married him and that now the ... the joke was on us."

Her hands trembled. "The poisoning was clumsily done ... and my father would have gone to prison. ..."

I was incredulous. "Your father poisoned your husband and *you*

took the blame? What kind of a father would let. ..."

She flushed faintly. "He said that he had less than a year to live ... and that he'd rather shoot himself than go to prison. He begged. ... " Her fingers clenched her handkerchief. "He said that if I would take the blame it would mean only a year in prison. When he died there would be a letter that would clear me."

"But when he died there was no letter?"

She turned on me almost fiercely. "He did *not* die. He is alive today. I found out that he had *never* been ill at all." Tears sprang into her eyes. "After the first few years, he did not even bother to write to me."

A lonely child, a lonely girl, a lonely woman. I touched her temples gently with my fingers.

Edgerton entered the room. "Will there be anything else this evening, sir?"

I rose. "Edgerton, Mrs. Desfontaines did not murder Orville."

His eyes went to her and then back to me. "I'm happy, sir."

"And, Edgerton, *I* did not murder Orville either."

"I am happy for *both* of you, sir."

He was about to leave.

"Edgerton."

"Yes, sir?"

"The thought comes to me that *you* might have murdered Orville."

He raised an eyebrow. "Me, sir?"
"Yes, *you*. In my interests, of course. You are loyal. You may have chosen to protect me by eliminating those who threaten me."

"No, sir," Edgerton said. "I did not kill Mr. Crawford. I did not even think of it at the time."

I rubbed my ear thoughtfully. "Since none of the three of us murdered Orville, that leaves only one other person."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton said.

I resumed pacing until I came to a decision. "Very well, I must kill Freddie."

"Sir. . . ." Edgerton said.

I held up a hand. "I cannot be dissuaded. I am resolved. Both of you will, of course, keep this confidential?"

"Sir. . . ." Edgerton said.

I shook my head. "I am not thinking of my own safety. But I realize that if I should die, Freddie will certainly be tempted to remove Amantha. He will probably feel himself threatened by her presence and reputation. I cannot have that."

"Charles," Amantha said. "I

think I should be the one to deal with Mr. Meridith. I can't have you risking prison."

"Sir and Madam. . . ." Edgerton said.

At that moment a second-floor scream skipped down the stairs.

I blinked. "That's Freddie! I recognize the timbre."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton said. "I'm afraid that his radio's fallen into his bathtub. The poor man has been electrocuted."

My eyes narrowed. "*We* are on the first floor and Freddie is on the second. How do you *know* that's what happened?"

Edgerton's face was bland. "Just a guess, sir. But I do know that the radio sits on a rickety shelf just above his bathtub. It *appears* solid, but the slightest . . . ah . . . bump upon the wall, and it will tumble into the tub."

I appraised Edgerton, but he did not lose his beatific innocence.

What in the world was I going to do with three million dollars? I sighed. Perhaps the three of us would think of something.

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